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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAMAKO 001364

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TAGS: ASEC PINR PREL ML AG

SUBJECT: ATT: HOSTAGES WILL BE RELEASED IN TWO, THREE OR
MAYBE FOUR WEEKS

REF: BAMAKO 01175

Classified By: Political Officer Aaron Sampson, Embassy Bamako, for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(U) Summary: President Amadou Toumani Toure (ATT) completed a two day state visit to Algeria on November 24-25 to discuss security concerns, development issues and the on-going hostage crisis involving Tuareg bandit Ibrahim Bahanga. On November 26 Radio France International reported that Bahanga, who was also in Algiers but did not meet with ATT, had pledged to liberate the 35 Malian soldiers he captured more than three months ago. The Malian government newspaper "L'Essor," however, quoted ATT as saying that Bahanga would release the hostages "in two or three weeks or maybe one month." Factors complicating the release are the logistics of assembling the hostages, who are reportedly dispersed throughout northern Mali, Niger and possibly as far as Chad, and questions regarding who is currently holding the hostages. End Summary.

ATT In Algiers

2.(C) President Toure meet with his Algerian counterpart President Bouteflika on November 24-25 in Algiers to discuss security coordination and the on-going hostage crisis in northern Mali. President Toure was accompanied by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Moctar Ouane. The Minister of Territorial Administration and President Toure's close confidant Kafougouna Kone, along with the Governors of Gao and Kidal, traveled to Algiers to lay the ground work a few days in advance of the presidential meeting. Bahanga was also reportedly in Algiers on November 24-25 but did not meet President Toure.

3.(C) Toure has repeatedly expressed frustration with Algeria's "mediation" efforts (reftel). In September Algeria mobilized more than USD 2 million to help finance the "reinsertion" of Tuareg ex-combatants into Malian society in accordance with the July 2006 Algiers Accords. Neither these funds, nor numerous trips by Malian and Tuareg leaders to Algiers for negotiations, produced any tangible response from Bahanga regarding the liberation of the hostages and his demand for a Malian withdrawal from the northern town of Tinzawaten. During the November 24-25 meetings in Algiers, both Presidents Toure and Bouteflika reiterated their support for the Algiers Accords.

And the Hostages?

4.(C) Prior to President Toure's departure for Algiers, some

in Bamako speculated that he might return from Algeria with the liberated hostages in hand. Such speculation appears to have been premature. "Algeria," said ATT following his meetings with President Bouteflika, "is currently working to gather up the hostages. I wish them good luck so that we can recover the hostages within the coming weeks."

5.(C) Tuareg contacts have raised two factors that may complicate the hostages' liberation. With Bahanga shuttling between Algiers, Tamaransset and perhaps Tripoli, it is unclear who is actually holding the hostages, what the captors' nationalities are, and whether they are fully behind Bahanga. Assembling the hostages, who are apparently scattered throughout northern Mali, Niger and possibly even Chad, poses an important logistical challenge.

Comment: Progress?

6.(C) One aim of ATT's visit to Algiers was to repair Mali's strained relations with Algeria. Judging from reports of the two day visit, it appears that Mali and Algeria are back on the same page in terms of peace and security in northern Mali at least for now. It does not appear, however, that ATT made much headway regarding the hostage crisis. Bahanga's continued ability to travel unimpeded throughout Algeria may also suggest that Algeria does not take the threat posed by Bahanga as seriously as President Toure - or, as many Malians now see it, the Algerians are the force behind Bahanga's fight to keep the central government from extending its control to northern Mali.

McCulley